

Secret Status of Women report paints grim picture for Canada ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Canada is falling behind the developed world in women's equality, as poverty rates climb for elderly single women and for single-parent families headed by women, says an internal report by Status of Women Canada.

According to the report, this country is in the bottom ranks in terms of the pay gap between men and women; support for child care and parental leave is well below average; the country registers 57th for gender equality in Parliament's elected members; and it lacks a national strategy to halt violence against women.

"Canada has no comprehensive national strategy to address violence against women, lagging behind several comparable countries, including the U.K., Ireland, Australia and New Zealand," says the draft document marked "secret."

The candid assessment, never intended for public release, is dated Feb. 10 this year and was ordered by the Privy Council Office to alert deputy ministers across many departments about issues facing women and girls in Canada.

A copy of the 35-page presentation — with five pages of "policy implications" blacked out entirely as "advice" — was obtained by CBC News under the Access to Information Act.

Minister declines comment

An expert on the ways women are affected by public policy said she was surprised by the accuracy and completeness of the analysis, given the federal government's "limited approach to gender issues."

"I'm really disappointed that this document didn't make it into the public sphere," said Kathleen Lahey, law professor at Queen's University in Kingston, Ont.

A spokesman for Kellie Leitch, the minister responsible for Status of Women, said Leitch "doesn't comment on draft slideshows."

"This was prepared by public servants for a committee of public servants and not shared with the minister's office," Andrew McGrath, Leitch's director of communications, said in an email. He declined further comment.

The report's assertion that Canada has no national strategy on violence against women appears contrary to Leitch's announcement on Sept. 15, 2014, of an "action plan" to address family violence and violent crimes against aboriginal women and girls.

However, a spokeswoman for Status of Women Canada said the \$25-million announcement was targeted to respond specifically to violence against indigenous women and girls. "On the broader issue of violence against women and girls, the government has taken a broad range of actions," Leonie Roux said, without elaborating.

The document does note some positives: Canadian women are better educated, and are entering the work force in greater numbers. But men are paid 20 per cent more than their female colleagues, a "pay gap" that puts Canada fourth from the bottom of 34 OECD countries, with only South Korea, Japan and Germany scoring worse.

"When it comes to the salary gap between the sexes, women have hit a brick wall," says the report.

And "while rates of male-on-male violence in Canada have diminished over time, rates of violence against women have not, and reporting has not increased." Rural, immigrant and indigenous women are cited as particularly vulnerable.

Fallout from recession

The report notes that poverty rates rose slightly between 2009 and 2011 for one-parent families headed by women, and for unattached elderly females, likely fallout from the 2008-09 global recession. (Figures for 2012 and beyond were not available.)

"A huge number of women have just been washed out of the whole safety net and pushed into part-time, self-employment [and] contract work," said Lahey, in validating the findings.

"And the two groups that have really taken it the hardest are single parents and older women."

The Status of Women spokeswoman called the report a "diagnostic document" intended to "facilitate discussion."

"As in all societies, we can always find areas for improvement such as addressing violence against women," said Roux. "All levels of government have a responsibility for, and are working on, addressing women's labour market participation, including salary gaps where they exist, and addressing violence against women."

Plans for a women's-issues debate in the current federal election campaign collapsed after Prime Minister Stephen Harper declined to participate and NDP Leader Tom Mulcair later chose not to participate without Harper's attendance.

Organizers instead plan one-on-one recorded interviews with leaders of the NDP, Liberals, Greens and Bloc. They are expected to air on Sept. 21.

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